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Shifting gears

The clutch gave out at Eau Claire, Wisconsin, a small
glancing scrape on the downhill offramp,
a sound like almost nothing before the uphill
shrieking, the smell of burning
metal, my mother's fuck-filled
come-on urging
(the same she used on us when we were late
or lazy). An Amoco station at the top of that hill,
my little sister's uh-oh eyes.

This was the blue Subaru and us, grinding
to a halt
twenty hours in to our thirty hour trek
to Mom's parents. Friday morning, and Eau Claire
was supposed to be fifteen minutes — gas, bathroom, snack
and *back in the car, kids*. Pavement
pouring out behind like Mom's personal triumph
and always the same rules: one can of Pringles,
gone in the first hour; one restaurant per day; one hotel
per trip. We had a schedule, we had a budget. At 15,
I could pitch a tent in five minutes, even
in the swarming dark. (Once, we set the tent
in a field of Grasslands cactus and Mom
held our wrists so we could squat, pee
without piercing our bums. All night
the ground stayed treacherous

beneath our sleeping bags and nearby coyotes
howled.)

We'd had our hotel the night before Eau Claire —
Not even a pee-stink one, my sister'd whispered.

From the car, I could see Mom
working on the mechanic, sunglasses
holding back her hair and her brown eyes
extra wide, climbing up the height of him.
I rolled down my window.

We've got six hundred miles ahead — she shook
her curls, keys jangling from one finger as her palms
turned to pleading. *I can't afford a new one*
and we can't get stuck here all weekend. Oh
please.

The voice that made you do things, the reason
I always kept my headphones on.
She followed that mechanic
back inside, surrender
uncertain.

A long time and then she came out,
smiling, hands pulsing like she was splashing
water on her face, each splash telling us
to get out of the car. She popped the trunk, snatched
the Walkman off my head, didn't even ask
first. *He's found some parts, says he can fix it cheap,*
but not before tomorrow. Says there's a campground a few miles
down the highway. The trunk was deconstructing — the tent
in my arms, a sleeping bag for my sister. A perfectly good motel
practically across the street.
I said I wasn't walking. I said *This*
is stupid. My sister said *Sshh.*
I dropped the tent in the gravel, reached back
into the car for my Walkman.

My mother shrugged and all her limbs
came unexpectedly loose. She threw the tent back in the trunk,
dust with it and walked away, and then that mechanic
drove us to the campground. Mom put her hand
on his thigh and tipped her head
sideways, her lips tucked under

but saying something anyway.

There wasn't a pool or mini-golf or anything
to do but sit by the tent
so I told Mom it was gross, her hitting
on that mullet-haired mechanic and she rose
to her feet, unfolding like a slow-motion leaf
and grinned. *Somebody's gotta get the car fixed. Besides
he's pretty cute, don't you think? Let's follow that path, see
where it goes.*

The path led to a creek where a turtle sunned itself
on a rock, just a single foot
dangling
in the water and Mom stopped, pointed: *Look
at that, girls. Did you ever see —?* Her sentence dangling
too, a voice like she'd swallowed
something thick, breathed in
fumes; like all the coffee in her veins
had turned to syrup. Like a whole day
lost didn't matter so much.
Before dark we walked to the store
for ice cream sandwiches, and Mom insisted
on holding hands, on swinging
all our arms forward.

The car wasn't ready until two
the next day, which meant an extra long lunch,
my sister and I alone in a too-bright diner an hour
after they took our plates and Mom told the waitress
no more refills — told us to wait at the table
while she went to check
on the car.

Back on the Interstate, Van Morrison sang
"Bright Side of the Road" and we danced, laughing,
giddy just for getting going, glad for every bump
under the tires. That night we slept in the car at a rest stop full
of sleeping families and by sun-up, the windows were dripping
from our honeyed breath.